



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 7
Issue 1 April 2003

Article 11

12-14-2016

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Recommended Citation

Miles, Carol (2016) "Antwone Fisher," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol7/iss1/11>

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Antwone Fisher

Abstract

This is a review of *Antwone Fisher* (2002).

Antwone Fisher is the story of a troubled young man who reacts to the world around him, violently, because he does not know what else to do. Based on the true-life story, Antwone (Derek Luke), a Navy Petty Officer, has a hair-trigger temper, and is sent to see Navy psychiatrist, Dr. Jerome Davenport (Denzel Washington). Here, Fisher begins to open up about his troubled past.

Antwone's narrative, aided by flashbacks, reveals a horrific physically and sexually abusive childhood. His father was murdered two months before his birth, in prison, to a mother who abandoned him after her release. Rev. Tate, who with his wife adopts Fisher, is a charismatic minister, and while he is marginal to the story, he is emblematic of a religion long on charisma and condemnation, but short on mercy.

Life with the Tates revolves around church activities. On Sundays, Rev. Tate conjures Jesus to provoke ecstatic worship. Mrs. Tate rewards the boys with vanilla wafers if they "catch the Holy Ghost." Away from church, she sadistically tortures and berates the boys for the smallest infractions. Antwone develops the ability to discern her moods based on smells in the air, to determine what kind of day it will be for himself and his two foster brothers, Dwight and Keith. Eventually, as a teenager, Antwone is kicked out of the home and bounces around institutions until he lands on the streets. Upon witnessing the tragic death of his only friend,

during a failed robbery attempt, he seeks refuge in the Navy, with emotional baggage in full tow.

Eventually he finds in Dr. Davenport, a father figure, and begins to let go of his shame. He finds a first love in Cheryl (Joy Bryant), who is also in the Navy. Their courtship is tender and innocent. These new relationships pacify the hunger in Antwone, but he still needs to deal with his past.

Antwone returns to Ohio to find his biological father's family. He meets relatives who lead him to the birth mother he never knew. Interestingly, Antwone does not want to "eat." Instead, he offers his mother a full plate, a litany of his life, chronicling his longings for her, his growth as a person, his decency. He wants her to know, in sum, that he is a good man. The film concludes with Antwone returning to his aunts' house to find a reunion in his honor. He is greeted by this extended family, and summoned by the elders to a banquet table, where he is given a place of honor and welcomed.

The conclusion thus mimics the opening scene in which we find a young Antwone standing alone in a vast, open field. A man leads him to a barn where African-American ancestors, representing every generation from slavery to present day, stand ready to welcome him. He is seated at the head of the table, a place of honor, with a grand feast placed before him. He is nurtured and nourished. But this

is a dream sequence and Antwone wakes to the shattered reality that he is alone in this world, and has much to work through before he can get there.

Critics of the film have chided Washington's directorial debut as formulaic and unimaginative. This narrative is far from a conventional Hollywood tale. The familiar theme is that of a broken young man who seeks help from an older, surrogate father figure, male therapist. But the heart and substance of this movie is to be found in its subtext.

What makes *Antwone Fisher* unique from similarly situated films, i.e. *Good Will Hunting*, is its historical subtext, the lingering legacy of slavery. The hyphen in African-American represents a larger breach that destroyed families in a totalizing and degrading system of chattel slavery. This rupture was further complicated by a color-caste system whereby light skin became synonymous with superiority. Furthermore, parents continued to perpetuate the mimetic violence they learned from slave owners.

The slave theme is further evidenced in the dialogue of Mrs. Tate, who refers to the boy's mothers as "no count mammies" and addresses each boy simply as "n*****." She pits Antwone and his foster brothers against one another. Keith, the bi-racial boy has lighter features and "good" hair. As Mrs. Tate tells the boys,

Keith is better because his father was white. Rev. Tate, however, beats Keith because of his parentage, alleging that he has "too much pride."

As Dr. Davenport explains to Antwone, the abuse he received was the "result of the treatment slaves received from their masters and passed on to their children." He offers this, not as an excuse, but to provide a context for understanding this aberrant behavior. The *Antwone Fisher* story is a personal narrative. But it is also a story of confronting the past, seeking professional help, and opening oneself to relationships that nourish the soul. It is a lesson in healing. The *Antwone Fisher* story is not an overtly religious film, but it does offer a spiritual liberation. Victimized, through no fault of his own, Antwone's liberation results in self-determination. Given the abuse of his past, it would be easy for Antwone to fall into addiction, hopelessness, and despair. There is something at work deep inside of Antwone that makes him continually strive to be a better person. It is a restorative grace.